



Stigma and the shaping of the pornography industry

Courtney Trouble

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gender and sexuality, or a fan who wants a deeper glimpse into the lives of porn stars, this is a book that most certainly deserves a place on your porn studies bookshelf.

Lynn Comella

Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

 lynn.comella@unlv.edu

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Stigma and the shaping of the pornography industry, by Georgina Voss, London, Routledge, 2015, 166 pp., £90.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-82117-9

Georgina Voss' *Stigma and the Shaping of the Pornography Industry* looks to the white-collar world of adult marketing – its distribution, sales, and technology development – to investigate how the stigma attached to the adult industry affects the companies and the employees who deal in X-rated sex entertainment.

Voss establishes a long-term commitment to softening or eradicating the stigma from all sectors of the industry through an introductory chapter that orients us historically. Voss investigates how the industry has been confronting stigma since it was legalized. In the 1970s and 1980s, obscenity trials framed the US/West Coast adult community, setting it apart from the mainstream film and video sector in which it was forged. At that point, two distinct weapons against stigma were used: the 'Playboy Method', which is a liberal cross-breeding of softcore sexuality and mainstream lifestyle branding; and the 'Hustler Method', which activates libertarian free speech, patriotism, and good ol' boy patriarchal high-fives and handshakes as a defence against moralistic infringements. The class markers of these models have been thoroughly discussed (see Kipnis 1993; Penley 1997) but it is worth reiterating that both still reinforce patriarchal heteronormativity. It is hard to say how indie, feminist, accessible, queer, or self-directed producer/performers benefit from either Playboy or Hustler modes of stigma defence.

This book's attempt to provide more nuance to the problem of stigma on the upper floors of the adult industry is welcome and long overdue. The only issue is that I do not see this conversation combining with any complementary essays on producer/performers, small collectives, small businesses, and social justice efforts, nor do I see a serious investigation into who the giant companies are, and what issues there may be in the growing divide between the porn workers and the upper floor. Academic investigations, especially those by current or former sex workers, that follow Voss' leading questions, paired with the irreplaceable point of view of the workers on the site of production, are key to unravelling the system of stigma once and for all.

I think it is fair to argue that while research on the tech sector is important, this book does not properly discuss the temporality of stigma, the privilege of anonymity, or the privilege of legal employment attached to being a white-collar industry member. There is much work and much writing to be done on the silencing effects of contract labour within any media industry. I think it is also fair to say that included in this type of analysis should be an in-depth look at income discrepancies between those who create pornographic content and those who sell it. Also, as someone who does both create and sell porn, sometimes using myself and sometimes using contracted workers, I am curious to know whether there are long-term effects to living with this double-stuffed stigma – is my health affected?

From the largest corporations to the smallest websites, we are no longer a subculture or underworld (even those of us who represent a subcultural underworld!) but a global media industry, and with the globalizing forces of internet media come many new issues. Censorship in China and the United Kingdom, Voss mentions, creates regional problems that reflect the way stigma is operationalized, legitimized, and even outright legalized. Globalization also brings payment systems into question, as overseas merchant accounts become the norm for small businesses, and credit-card and banking companies introduce morality clauses that result in small businesses, artists, performers, and large corporations alike insisting on content-related self-censorship to avoid having our earnings withheld or accounts closed.

In California, the X industry is a tax-paying, law-abiding industry made up of retailers, editors, art directors, techies, photographers and videographers, gaffers, sound techs, drivers, web designers, cleaners, agents, and sex workers. We are a heterogeneous community within a shrinking network of distribution resources. We are creating diverse work, especially in this wondrous self-publishing age and alongside powerful feminist, queer, people of colour, plus size, and subcultural movements within the industry. Our trade organizations and publications have taken great care to establish the industry as reputable, credible, and legit. But it does not matter – this tight-knit industry is still subject to gatekeeping, protection, and vetting from old-boy alliances – as well as long-standing stigma that affects everyone from the ground floor up. Clearly, the industry is never boring. We are never not fighting.

Stigma perpetuates two particular problems in adult entertainment. Voss discusses at length ‘sniffers’ – industry newcomers attracted to the ‘dirt and deviance perceived in adult, long considered a party business’. They make trust harder to give and receive in the business sector as well as on set, and make the network of possible employers and collaborators smaller. Furthermore, as Voss discusses, stigma means there are no formal training programmes – nowhere that a person can go to be accredited in porn performance or production that would include education on respectful workplace cultures. As she notes, ‘stigma itself has created an environment where potential employees are deterred by the consequences or difficulties of having the nature of their work known’.

There are many ways in which the industry has tried to combat the effects of stigma, as well as stigma itself. Voss uncovers a lot of this rich history, especially the introduction of trade organizations, or the intense amount of insular trust-building through now-iconic trade shows like Adult Entertainment Expo, and the development of industry-specific and dual-purpose technologies that solve issues around payment and access.

Dual-purpose and industry-specific technologies are direct responses to stigma. Dual-purpose tech products are often branded plainly, simply, and with very vague language. These products can be marketed to adult and mainstream industry alike, with the latter unaware of its use in the former. Industry-specific services that have been created as a response to stigma are the cornerstones of adult business in the internet age, where online payment processing and affiliate programming are often the core of our business models.

Other white-collar considerations discussed in the book include many attempts to innovate a self-sufficient industry, an insular network of banking, marketing, distribution, sales, and advertising that does not need outside help. Alternative payment processors are seen as a direct solution for mainstream banks and merchants enforcing stigmatizing policies that deny businesses and even individual workers access to necessary financial services. The shady practices of non-adult merchant banking are another reason why we must create ‘plain-label’ companies to mask our products to the public market. Voss argues that affiliate programmes are a direct response to the difficulties inherent in adult media and advertising. Since mainstream industries are loath to advertise on our sites, we look to our own community to market and network our various businesses.

I think that the resulting word-of-mouth programmes and generic products associated with fighting stigma are mere band-aids. They do not so much combat stigma as offer unwieldy and frustrating work-arounds. Affiliate programmes are annoying, out-dated, and rarely successful for the small business owner in the modern world. Furthermore, they rely too heavily on model participation, which means more work for the performers who are directly advertising for their bosses. It is only good if it is good, you know what I mean? I have met some people who make a living off of it, but even I in all my internet-ness barely bring in \$30 a month in affiliate money. In comparison with the power of other entertainment industries to advertise, it puts us all at a great disadvantage.

Stigma has limited our ability to market ourselves. Alternative payment processors still answer to Visa, a company which has very strict limits as to what it will and will not sell. One of Voss's interview subjects connects Visa's anti-porn policies with their desire to market credit cards to children. Hey Visa, where do *you* think babies come from?

In addition to the powerful effect that trade shows and conventions like Adult Entertainment Expo or XBiz have on the ability for white-collar workers to come up with work-arounds for doing business in adult entertainment, Voss recognizes that trade organizations, most notably the Free Speech Coalition, have been crucial to legitimizing the X industry and responding to our needs as technology creates new opportunities and new issues. The book traces trade advocacy in the adult industry back to 1969. The Adult Film Association of America helped protect producers and distributors from obscenity trials by working with first amendment lawyers, a connection that still exists to this day via the Free Speech Coalition (a group largely funded by porn companies).

Other organizations have not been so lucky. The Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation, for instance, was started by a former performer, Dr Sharon Mitchell, in 1998 in response to the industry's growing need for protection and prevention against HIV. In addition to STD testing, it also provided health care, retirement assistance, and counselling. Yet it was shuttered in 2011 after two main events: first, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation led a full-scale campaign against it, and then an anonymous hacker released private patient records on a popular website. Performers, already riddled with stigma, now had their birth names and dates, and even home contact info, released to the public in a threatening and abusive context – justified on the grounds that porn performers do not deserve any better.

Mainstream media's (mis)representations of our HIV/STI scares, crimes, trials, and scandals haunt our history and our present. Too often, public health policies point to porn as a scape-goat for the disease, violence, and abuse inherent in our society instead of confronting the notion that patriarchal, sex-negative attitudes are the main causes of gender and sexual violence, and the miseducation of our youth with regards to sexuality is increasingly creating a world where STIs are needlessly spread due to sheer ignorance. Porn performers are no less immune to harassment than we are to disease; where is the government committee for the safety of the entire body of a porn performer, not just the holes?

According to Voss, stigma has shaped the adult industry by forcing it to expand and adapt, resulting in a self-sufficient industry uniquely fit to innovate itself, as well as in the mainstream industries with whom it comes in contact. As I mentioned earlier about our insular strength and self-sufficient networks, I agree. Voss' research on the white-collar adult business and stigma is valuable and helps us connect the dots between commerce, sex, and deviance, but I would stress that the real damages of stigma are still mostly felt by those doing the 'dirty work'.

While distributors and bloggers might complain about overexposure to sexual imagery or embarrassing questions, those of us on our backs and holding cameras are put at a much greater risk. I would like to see how the information garnered in this book can benefit the lives of those performing and directing in porn, or how anti-pornography movements

collaborate with businesses to promote stigma, or the social and psychological implications of this stigma on a larger or long-term scale.

What does it mean that yesterday I heard a construction worker guy say ‘adult film performer’ in a Wendy’s? Or that last month I heard a famous gay man say ‘hooker’ in front of his grad students in a classroom while standing before a picture of his own dick? Or that I can’t get a scene that has fisting in it printed on a dvd or sold on a website? Or that every mainstream publication in the country covered Stoya’s brave calling out of alleged rapist James Deen and the community’s support for the recovery of Christie Mack? Or that today, the entire performer industry and all of our trade organizations showed up in my hometown to protect the industry’s right to keep its testing and barrier use protocols in place. One true, unspoken benefit of all of this fighting surely must be that some white collar, somewhere, is multi-tasking: writing a report on the sales of bareback scenes vs. the cost of moving to Nevada, encouraging models to sign up to be affiliates, and coming up with the words and images that represent us on boxes and screens across the planet.

We who must earn a living work within the limits of the system, relying on alternative processors and affiliate programmes and pseudonyms, need white collars, but we also need to have opportunities to wear them if we want to. We need academics, activists, and those in the business – and the opportunities to be those people ourselves as well – in order to confront the bigger issues, and help effect large-scale shifts in financial sectors and public policy that will promote porn literacy, eradicate stigma, and hold those who perpetuate it accountable.

These final random thoughts urge me to end this review by saying:

Yes! And?

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Courtney Trouble
TROUBLEfilms, California College of the Arts, USA
 courtneytrouble@gmail.com

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Pornography: structures, agency and performance, by Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee, Cambridge, Polity, 2015, 200 pp., \$20.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-745-65194-1

There are very few sociological issues which are more contentious and hyperbolic than those involving pornography. Issues related to sexually explicit media trigger tremendous social concerns, which have effects on healthcare, laws, government and media in general. Although a great deal is written about pornography, the majority of such writings are based on anecdote and hyperbole. While the bulk of these writings present negative views and concerns about pornography, there are also ‘pro-porn’ materials which ignore or gloss over what may be legitimate and reasonable concerns or evidence of negative effects. The uninformed reader is easily